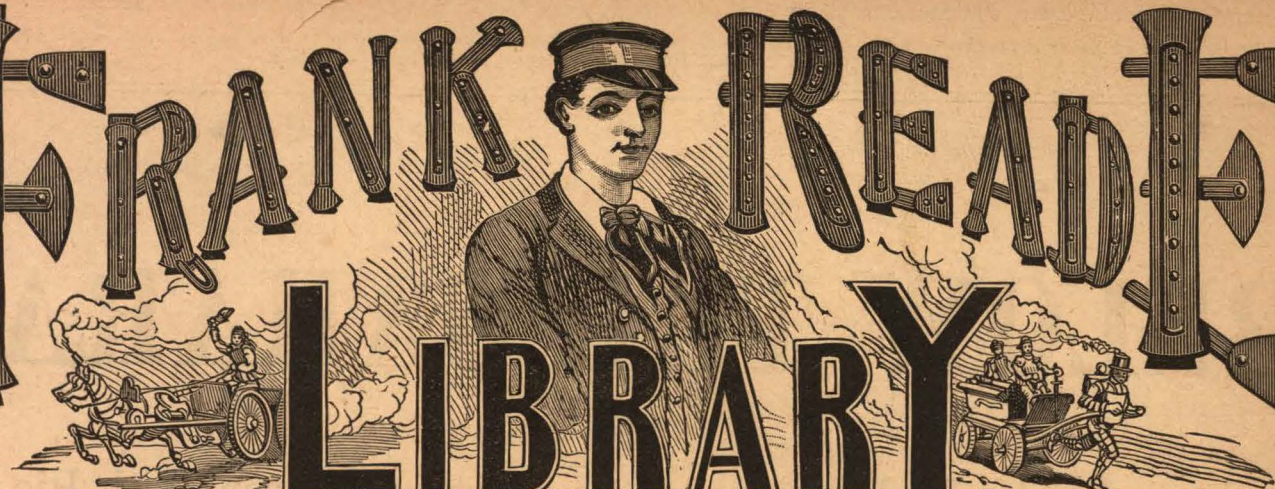


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Below the Sahara:

or, Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring an Underground River, With His Submarine Boat.

By "NONAME."



Horried, Frank sprang to his side. "My soul!" he cried. "What is the trouble, Brosseau? You are hurt?"
"I—am just a bit faint—I'll be all right soon!" declared the savant. "It is only a flesh wound!"
"A wound!" ejaculated Frank. Then something hissed past his ear.

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BELOW THE SAHARA;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr., Exploring an Underground River, With His
Submarine Boat.

A MARVELOUS STORY OF THE GREAT DESERT.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "In White Latitudes," "The Lost Navigators," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FRENCH SYNDICATE.

ONE day, Frank Reade, Jr., the distinguished young inventor, who scarcely needs an introduction to the reader, so world-wide is his fame, received a cablegram from Paris, via London, which gave him a great surprise, and was the means of his entering upon a series of adventures, the like of which probably human being has never experienced.

When he received the cablegram, he had just put the stores aboard his new submarine boat, the "Venture," with the view of starting at once upon a deep sea trip.

For he had long since solved the wonderful problem of submarine navigation and perfected a deep sea boat in which he could remain for an indefinite time at the bottom of the sea.

The cablegram, however, had the result of completely changing his plans as we shall see. Thus it read:

"No. 14 RUE DE MONTMARTRE, PARIS.

"JUNE, 17th 18—

"FRANK READE, JR., READESTOWN, U. S. A.—The French Government at the instigation of the Egyptian department has granted a charter to the Great Sahara Exploration and Colonization Company, of Paris, France. Capital, fifty million francs. The mouth of an underground river which empties into the Niger has been discovered and it is believed that by tapping this at certain intervals, a system of irrigation can be established which will redeem nearly the entire desert and make of it the most productive and fertile region on earth. Our representative with full power to act, Monsieur Pierre Brosseau is at this moment on board the La Gascoyne en route to New York to confer with you in regard to the possibility of chartering your submarine boat and your personal services for a thorough exploration of this underground river. We hope to be able to enlist your sympathy and support, and any favors you may confer upon M. Brosseau will be duly appreciated by your humble servants,

"Respectfully the undersigned,

"M. HONORE LA CHATILLON,

"M. HUGO LA VONTANIE,

"M. GASPARD DE MOURIER,

"M. BERTRAND LEGRAND.

{ "Board of Control and Honorable Commissioners of the Great Sahara Exploration and Colonization Company of Paris, France.

(POSTSCRIPT).—Mr. Brosseau should arrive in New York by the 22nd, in the morning."

It is hardly necessary to say that Frank Reade, Jr., was not only interested but surprised as he read this message from a foreign land.

He was surprised that the honorable commissioners of the French company should consider seriously such an apparently hair brained scheme. He was interested because the exploration of an under-

ground river would afford him just the element of adventure and risk which he was looking for.

"An underground river below the Sahara," he muttered. "That will afford plenty of scope, I vow! I can see no better way than to adopt the scheme—at least, I will have a serious talk with M. Brosseau when he arrives."

So he touched a bell, and the next moment a diminutive dorky appeared in the door of the private office. He grinned and ducked his head, saying:

"Ise beah, sah. Wha' kin dis chile do for you, Marse Frank?"

"Pomp," said the young inventor, sharply, "where is Barney?"

"He am jes' outside, sah."

"Tell him to come in with you."

"A'right, sah!"

The coon disappeared. In a few moments, however, he reappeared, and behind him came a sturdy son of the Emerald Isle, with a shock of brick red hair, and chock full of fun.

These two colleagues or companions were Frank Reade, Jr.'s most trusted servants. They had accompanied him upon all his great expeditions to all parts of the world.

Two livelier, jollier rascals, the sun never shone upon.

"At yer service, sor!" exclaimed Barney, scraping profoundly, "the naygur said yez sent fer me, Misther Frank?"

"That is true, Barney," replied the young inventor, "I have something to tell you, both of you!"

They ducked their heads.

"Our projected trip to the coral isles of the Pacific will, I fear, have to be given up."

Barney gasped and Pomp gave a sneeze.

"Shure, sor, that's too bad!"

"Golly! dat am drefful!"

"Hold on!" said Frank, with a smile. "I have not abandoned that project without the prospect of a better one!"

Instantly their faces lit up.

"Shure, Misther Frank, I'll belave that yez know phwat's best!"

"I hope so!" rejoined Frank; "the new project is a daring one."

With this he read them the French cablegram and explained the project to them. They listened with wonderment and interest.

"Now," concluded Frank, "if I can make all arrangements satisfactory with the Frenchmen, we will take that trip below the Sahara. It will surpass anything we have heretofore undertaken!"

"Golly!" exclaimed Pomp, standing on his head in the doorway.

"Whurroo!" ejaculated Barney, turning a flip-flap right there on the spot.

"None of that skylarking you rascals!" cried Frank, "be off with you and see that you have the boat in ship-shape order. Leave nothing undone."

And away they scurried.

Before the 22d arrived the Venture was in fine condition for the

cruise. Frank had studied up all the maps and charts of the Sahara, and fancied he could locate the spot even where the subterranean river entered the Niger.

Frank had wired a friend in New York to meet Brosseau at the wharf and place him aboard a train for Readestown. He would arrive sometime that evening.

Frank's carriage was at the depot, and when the distinguished servant alighted he was driven at once to Frank's palatial residence. Here the dinner table was spread and he was received cordially.

M. Brosseau was a tall, fine-looking type of the Parisian, with urbane manners and faultless dress. In a few moments he was fast friends with the young inventor.

Later in the evening they repaired to the library and discussed the Sahara project at full length.

The result was that when M. Brosseau retired Frank took his hand, and said:

"You may cable your people in the morning that we shall start within the week for the mouth of the Niger, or the west coast of Africa."

Brosseau was delighted, and no doubt slept happily that night. The next morning he sent the cablegram.

Then he went down to the machine works with Frank to take a look at the wonderful submarine boat.

This rested in a tank, or large basin in the great yard of the works. This was connected with a lock and gates into a canal which led down to the river below which was navigable to the sea.

Upon construction the Venture had been launched into the tank and there it floated, waiting for the disposition of its owner.

Frank led his visitor aboard the Venture by means of a gangway, and then proceeded to describe it while M. Brosseau listened with the deepest of interest.

"You will see," said the young inventor, "that the model of the Venture is not unlike that of that class of warship called a monitor. There is no great depth of hold and the beam is wide. This is intended to assure the ship's steadiness and seaworthiness while under water."

"I have never seen a vessel of this model before, M. Reade," said the Parisian.

"Well, it is not a common type," continued Frank; "the hull of the Venture is of thin but strong steel. It is essentially water tight in all parts, the doors and windows to the cabins having flanges of rubber which hermetically close and seal the vessel."

"Amidships is the turret or round cabin with windows looking all ways. You will notice the bell mouthed receivers over this turret. They extend to the great tank in the hold, from which the water is expelled by pneumatic pressure when it is desired to raise the boat from the ocean depths. Also on the forward part of the turret is an observation tower with plate glass windows all around it."

"This curious turtle shaped structure in the stern with the tubes in it, is to accelerate the sinking of the boat when the lower valve in the tank is open and the boat is under water. It admits water to the tank to sink or raise the boat, or in other words to gauge or regulate its altitude while under water. Without it the boat would either go straight to the bottom or else to the surface."

"The mechanism of the Venture? Electricity of course, consisting of powerful dynamos fed by a system of storage of which I have the secret. The engine and dynamo room is in the forward hold under the pilot house. In the pilot house is an electric key board by means of which an operator can regulate the boat at his pleasure. Over the pilot house you will see a powerful electric searchlight especially designed for penetrating great distances under water."

"Now for the interior of the boat. There are all necessary compartments for sleeping, eating, cooking, stores and machinery. Five persons can find comfortable state-rooms aboard the Venture."

"How do we manage to find sufficient air while under water for an extended time? Easy enough! Here is our chemical generator which, filled with the necessary chemicals, can generate enough pure air, disseminated in tubes throughout the ship to support human life an indefinite length of time. Yes, the Venture can maintain a fair rate of speed under water. She is lowered or raised by the filling or discharging of the great tank which extends along her keel. This is the submarine boat in all its parts."

"I am instructed and charmed," declared M. Brosseau, eulogistically; "it is the prince of all inventions, and no one but an American genius could have brought it to such a degree of perfection."

CHAPTER II.

HO! FOR THE SAHARA!

FRANK smiled at the effusiveness of M. Brosseau's decision, so characteristic of a polite Frenchman.

Then they sat down at a table in the cabin and began to study a number of charts.

Brosseau was thoroughly familiar with the Sahara region and quite able to give all directions as to how to reach the mouth of the underground river.

He had explored parts of the Niger country which he declared had never before been visited by a white man.

"The Niger," he declared, "is like no other river in the world for diversity of scenery and variety of characteristics. At one time it flows through deep walled canyons and over great rapids. At another time it is completely lost in a labyrinth of marshes and lowlands where it is almost impossible to find the true channel. Also these regions are peculiarly deadly to human life."

"We must guard against that," said Frank.

"Yes, or lose our lives. In this wonderful river there is one island, that of Jimballa which is 220 miles long."

"Whew!" exclaimed Frank, "there is no equal to that."

"You are right. Now beyond this island of Jimballa we will find the tributary which followed up for a few hundred miles finds its source in the subterranean regions of the Great Sahara."

"Is the Niger navigable to this spot?" asked Frank.

"I think it is! We may encounter some swift channels, but in a submarine boat we ought to find our way through them."

"No doubt!"

"I cannot tell you more of the Niger until we enter it. The delta is in the Gulf of Guinea, and between the Bights of Benim and Biafra or in latitude 5 deg. 30 min. north. We shall experience some difficulty at the delta, as there are many false channels. But we will succeed despite that."

"I think so," agreed Frank, though he had begun to see how difficult an enterprise he had embarked in.

However, he was not the one to falter at an obstacle or hindrance of any kind, so he agreed to all of M. Brosseau's suggestions, and the plans were at length fully completed.

Barney and Pomp meanwhile had lost no time in getting the stores aboard and fulfilling their part of the programme.

So that one day the submarine boat and its voyages were all ready for the start.

Of course reports of the enterprise had gone abroad, and great throngs of people gathered about the river banks to see the start.

It was a beautiful June day when this was made.

At the appointed hour the voyagers went aboard the Venture. A number of workmen opened the gates of the lock, and the boat settled to the level of the canal.

Then it glided down and out into the current of the river.

A great cheer went up from the crowd assembled. Frank answered it by appearing on deck and waving the American flag.

It was easy to see that the best of good wishes went with the submarine voyagers. And indeed it was an arduous enterprise they had embarked upon.

In due course the submarine boat reached the sea, and then began the long journey across the stormy Atlantic to the west coast of Africa.

Frank headed for the Azores, as this was the best course and travelled upon the surface when the sea was calm, and a few hundred feet under the surface when it was tempestuous, as the force of the waves could not reach them there.

The Venture was buoyant and stanch, but she was light and had not been constructed with a view to buffeting the hard storms and winds of the Atlantic.

The voyagers enjoyed themselves exceedingly, and all looked forward with joyous anticipation to the months of adventure before them in the wild subterranean depths of the Sahara rivers.

Day by day the Venture cut down the distance between the shores of America and the Azores. M. Brosseau paced the deck and studied the horizon hour by hour, as if he really expected the shores of Africa by some miracle to suddenly loom up before them.

Barney was generally busy about his work in the engine room, and Pomp was usually to be found in the cooking galley.

But for all this they found time for an occasional friendly bit of skylarking, for each was inordinately fond of playing practical jokes upon the other. It was hard to say which generally got the best of the argument.

But evenings, when the sea was calm and the air balmy and breathing of the tropics, they would come on deck, Barney with his fiddle and Pomp with his banjo.

Then they would make the hours merry until past midnight with Irish ballads and plantation melodies, all of which enlivened the soul and helped to deaden the monotony of a sea voyage.

But one day land was sighted due east. Frank took his bearings and at once decided that it was one of the Azores, possibly the Island of Terceira.

However, no attempt was made to stop here, for the voyagers were anxious to reach the mouth of the Niger. So they continued on in the direction of the Madeiras.

These were sighted the next day, and the Venture bore off a trifle to the westward, and proceeded on until the Canary Isles were sighted.

Below these they crossed the Tropic of Cancer, and far to the eastward a long, low-lying coast line was seen. This was the coast of Africa.

The Sahara was in sight, for here it came to the very verge of the sea, but our voyagers were yet to travel hundreds of miles further before they could enter upon it at the desired point.

Two days later Cape Blanco was passed, and a course made for Cape Verde. Steadily down the coast the little submarine boat worked its way.

We will not dwell upon all the incidents of that run around the African capes into the Gulf of Guinea.

M. Brosseau could stand on the Venture's deck and point out the different possessions of Europe in this new country.

"Over there," he said, "is Liberia, the freehold of the blacks. There is the Gold Coast of Ashantee, the property of Great Britain. Next to it Germany owns a slice and again comes Britain. It will not be many centuries ere the entire continent will be divided among foreign born residents and, as the phrase goes, rescued from darkness and brought into the broad and open glare of civilization."

"Or at least made the spoils of a half dozen European monarchies," said Frank.

M. Brosseau smiled.

"You have the true American spirit," he said. "I suppose you would incite a revolution and make of it all one grand republic."

"And that is just what it will be some day," declared Frank. "It can never be governed by so many heads. It would create internal strife and discord. I am in sympathy with the Boers, who, if they are a bit eccentric, are inclined to fight for their freehold and their rights."

M. Brosseau laughed heartily.

"I admire you Yankees for your candor and your pluck," he said, and then dropped the subject.

Into the Gulf of Guinea the submarine boat made its way. All were upon the qui vive now for it was a straight course to the delta of the Niger, and a day at the most must bring them to it.

None of the voyagers ever forgot that first view of the great delta. The mighty tracts of marsh, the jungles and stretches of waving palms all made a scene of desolate wildness such as it is hard to conceive the like of.

And now began the real difficulty of finding the true channel of the river.

Leagues of winding lagoons and straits were passed through ere at length Frank felt convinced that he was in the true Niger.

The current was so extremely sluggish that it was very difficult to tell the true course. But finally all believed that they had struck at last the right channel.

It required fully two days of careful exploration to pass through the Niger delta. Then the true river was spread to view.

And the wilderness at periods gave way to great stretches or savannas with ricefields and plantations of immense proportions.

No effort was made to communicate with or make the acquaintance of the natives on the river banks. The submarine boat, as rapidly as possible, sailed on up the Niger.

At every turn new scenery unfolded itself, and the seaboard was gradually left behind.

M. Brosseau paced the deck, and scanned the shores with the keenest of interest.

This was not the first time he had traveled over this part of the Niger, so that the scenes about were quite familiar to him. Moreover, it was the delight of his heart that he was every moment drawing nearer to the mouth of the underground river, which he now saw the possibility of exploring.

Volumes might be written descriptive of that sail of the Niger, but the limited space of this narrative will not admit of more than passing notice while we pass on to scenes and incidents of a more thrilling character.

For weeks the Venture threaded its way through swamps and lagoons, channels and lakes, sometimes of immense width, through rocky canyons, over swift rapids, where the little boat was hard put to it to ascend, and under the overhanging foliage of mighty forests.

Our adventurers spent nearly all of their time on deck, sleeping the hot tropical nights in hammocks while the Venture swung at anchor in mid-stream.

At times great shoals of crocodiles were met, and huge water snakes of enormous size crossed the bow of the boat to give the voyagers a chill.

In tree tops beautiful plumaged birds and chattering monkeys thronged. The tiger sometimes was seen crouching in the depths of a jungle, and the elephant and wild deer came down to slake their thirst in the waters of the river.

The lion's roar was often heard, and at night the hyena and the wolf made things hideous with their howls. These and thousands of other features peculiar to the tropics were encountered.

But the first really exciting incident did not occur until the Venture had reached a point far up in the heart of the Soudan.

CHAPTER III.

THE COURSE OF THE NIGER.

FAR up where the river takes that great bend into Timbuctoo, which is called the Knee, one day the Venture emerged from a high walled canyon to see spread before the view a mighty lake caused by the widening of the river.

Miles of low country were flooded thus, and the appearance was that of a vast inland sea.

The hour was near noon; the sun beat down with tropical ferocity.

Barney was in the pilot house and the other voyagers were stretched out upon the deck under white awnings, trying to escape the intense heat.

On emerging from the canyon, Barney began to use a sounding device which automatically registered the depth of the stream on a dial in the pilot house. In order to do this he was obliged to slacken speed.

Just to the right was a vast growth of sedge and swamp grass; deep in this there lurked a half hundred deadly foes.

Eight long canoes were in the tall grass and in each were a half dozen savage blacks armed with javelins and clubs. Their glistening eyes were fixed upon the slowly moving boat.

At an early hour that morning they had seen the Venture enter the canyon from a height of land near by. The river here took an acute angle.

They were lying in ambush for what they considered legitimate prey. Whether they would bag it or not remained to be seen.

The Venture was proceeding slowly and no one thought of looking aft or apprehended danger from that quarter. Barney was engaged in locating the channel.

So that the eight light canoes were not observed when they shot out of the sedgy grass and crept up silently behind the submarine boat.

Dusky hands gripped the rear rail of the Venture, black lithe forms went over it and sprung upon the after deck.

Not until nearly a score of the blacks had thus boarded the Venture did the voyagers become aware of their deadly peril.

The warning first came through M. Brosseau, who arose from his hammock to go into the cabin. His astonishment and horror were not to be described as he gazed aft.

"Sacrel!" he exclaimed in a low, tense voice. "On your lives, friends, we are attacked!"

"What!" ejaculated Frank, upon his feet in a moment. Then he too beheld the astounding spectacle.

But no time must be lost. It was necessary to act and instantly.

With horrid yells the black crew made a rush forward. Brosseau had already reached the cabin door, Frank leaped into the pilot house, and Pomp went down the hatchway into the engine room, closing the steel trap after him.

All was done in the twinkling of an eye, but it was not a moment too soon.

The keen javelins rattled against the doors and windows, and the next moment the black horde were trying to force their way into the cabin.

They certainly had possession of the deck. But this did not, by any means, mean the capture of the boat.

In vain they tried to force their way into the cabin and the pilot-house. The steel doors resisted them.

While the voyagers had now recovered their self-possession, and were able to take measures to overcome their assailants. Yet this did not relieve the situation of some risk.

Had the blacks been able to force a window or door in that moment the result might have been serious. But luckily they did not.

And while M. Brosseau was desperately wondering how they were to meet the emergency, Frank was at Barney's shoulder.

"How deep is the channel?" he asked.

"Thirty feet, sor."

"Not deep enough. Put on speed," commanded the young inventor.

Then he watched the sounding dial eagerly, while the boat swiftly ran into deeper water.

Frank's purpose was obvious. If he could reach the deeper water in season, all would be saved. If the blacks forced a window or door before then, all would be lost.

Forty—forty-five feet! the dial registered. Then fifty was recorded. This would leave the tops of the masts out of water, but these could be lowered by an automatic device.

"Now!" said the young inventor, "I think we can shake them off!"

Barney pressed the tank lever. The next moment the boat began to settle. Down it went with a plunge.

The blacks were left like flies floundering in the maelstrom of water. Being perfect swimmers of course they did not drown.

But there were crocodiles in plenty in that water and before they were able to scramble into their canoes a number of them fell victims to the saurians.

When the Venture went down of course it was into dark depths. But not for long.

Frank touched an electric button and in a moment the interior of the air-ship was ablaze with light.

From the windows of the Venture all could look out into the depths of the river and see objects quite plainly within a wide radius.

"Hurrah!" cried M. Brosseau, delightedly. "We gave them a surprise, I'll warrant!"

"You are right," agreed Frank, "and no doubt it was a surprise."

"I suppose, however, none of them are likely to drown."

"They need fear only the crocodiles."

And at that moment Pomp pointed through the cabin window, crying:

"Golly! Dere am one ob dem gwine to make a fat meal fo' de reptiles."

A monster crocodile was seen darting away into the depths with one of the blacks in his jaws. The sight was a fearful one.

The Venture continued on for some ways under water. Then Frank ordered Barney to go again to the surface.

The Venture leaped up into daylight. This time it was seen that they were well out into the lake, and the canoes were but specks in the distance.

The decks were quickly dried by the fierce rays of the sun, and the Venture was enabled to continue on her way as quietly as if nothing had happened. But, despite this, there had been a moment when the situation was critical.

Now, the incident was over, the voyagers were buoyant in spirits, and on the whole relished the spice of the affair. Yet it was decided safest, henceforth, to proceed with more caution.

All that day they sailed across the great lake. At nightfall the shores began to contract, and they anchored for the night in a narrow gorge.

Brosseau was much excited.

"We have made grand progress," he declared. "I think by tomorrow noon, we will reach the mouth of the Sahara river."

This announcement created some excitement and much interest. Barney and Pomp were delighted.

And as Brosseau had predicted, the next day the Venture diverged from the true channel of the Niger, and entered a tributary which extended to the northeast.

And now the country began instantly to undergo a change.

They were in fact already in the Soudan and must in a few days at farthest come to the sands of the Great Sahara.

But Brosseau said:

"We shall touch the verge of the Great Desert only. Under a high hill of granite called the Talna Mount the river emerges from its subterranean course. We shall then enter upon our trip below the Sahara!"

But the rank vegetation of the tropics was no longer present.

There were barren plains, rocky ravines, with only clumps of palms here and there as an oasis. Everything pointed to the approach to the Great Desert.

Animal life was rarely seen, but a number of times wildly clad horsemen were seen galloping across the plains, and when questioned the French savant would shrug his shoulders, and say:

"We do not want their acquaintance. They are worse than the Bedouins, and to fall into their clutches would only mean robbery and death."

"I have heard that the lower verge of the desert is infested with fierce tribes of bandits and barbarians," said Frank. "Are they always nomadic?"

"By no means!" replied Brosseau. "Some of them are organized into communities and have built walled cities, from which they make a business of sallying forth and scouring the entire desert for prey. Any caravan or traveling party is at any moment liable to an attack from them."

"Ugh!" exclaimed the young inventor, "the Government of the Soudan, or at least of Egypt, ought to take measures to exterminate the wretches!"

"Ah, that would not be easy. They are well fortified and are very hard to defeat. It would be impossible for an army to subvert in this barren region, and only a large army could hope to give them fair battle."

"Then they are almost unassailable?"

"Just so. But so far as you and I are concerned, we are content to let them alone. They will some day eat each other up."

"Ah, but will they not interfere with your project of colonizing the Sahara?"

"As soon as we can establish our system of irrigation and reclaim the desert we can support men enough to hold them at bay and eventually exterminate them. Oh, we apprehend that they will give us much trouble."

The words had hardly dropped from his lips when he gave a sharp cry of pain and blood shot from his neck and he reeled and sank partly to his knees. Horrified Frank sprang to his side.

"My soul!" he cried. "What is the trouble, Brosseau? You are hurt?"

"I am just a bit faint—I'll be all right soon!" declared the savant, "it is only a flesh wound!"

"A wound!" ejaculated Frank. Then something hissed past his ear. Then there was a thud against the steel door of the cabin and a lead bullet splashed over its surface.

In an instant Frank realized the truth. They were being fired upon from the shore and at such a distance that the report could only be faintly heard in the face of the wind. It was a moment of peril.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE UNDERGROUND RIVER.

Of course Frank's first impulse was to drag the wounded savant to a place of safety. But already Barney had come to his assistance.

"Shure it's some av thim barbarians over ferninst that cliff, sor!" he cried. "Shure they 'ave foine line on the deck!"

"Then we must get under cover. Heigho! they shoot like fiends, don't they?" exclaimed Frank, as a bullet cut away a part of his sleeve.

Before they reached the pilot house Barney had received a shot through his cap and a small flesh wound in the arm.

But in the pilot house they were safe, and could now locate their foes.

They were a group of the desert robbers upon a high cliff, distant some two hundred yards. It was a miracle that their bullets had done no greater harm.

Brosseau was found to be only slightly wounded, the bullet having inflicted a slight gash in the muscles of the neck, nothing more.

A bandage was applied and he was all right, and as he declared, ready for retaliation.

Meanwhile the Arabs on the river bank had been occupied in firing a perfect fusillade of bullets at the Venture. Of course they could do no harm.

Barney and Pomp had secured their rifles, and were eager to open a return fire. But, after some consideration, Frank said:

"On the whole, I think we would do well not to answer their fire."

"Why not, Monsieur Reade?" asked Brosseau, in surprise.

"Well, we could gain nothing by it. They can do us no harm,

and it would mean only a needless expenditure of ammunition and sacrifice of human life. I am always averse to needlessly taking human life."

"But we ought to teach them a lesson."

"We shall have opportunity for that when we get to close quarters some time. But they would not profit by any lesson we might read them now."

The savant put down his rifle.

"On the whole you are right, Monsieur Reade!" he declared; "there is no need of taking human life except in self-defense."

So the Venture did not retaliate upon the foe as she might have done, but sailed on past the cliff and out of range, and it was at this juncture that, turning a bend in the stream, a high hill loomed up just in front.

An exclamation escaped Brosseau's lips.

"At last!" he cried; "it is the hill of Talna!"

"It is?" cried Frank, eagerly; "then we must soon enter the subterranean river!"

"Just so!" agreed the savant. "So far our expedition is a success!"

"But it is not yet begun!" cried Frank.

"True enough!"

As they drew nearer now to the hill of Talna, all were much on the qui vive. Bend after bend of the winding stream was rounded, and yet the hill seemed as far away as ever.

It was two hours later that the Venture came to the base of the hill. Here they came into a wide lagoon, the water of which was as blue and transparent as the sky.

This was faced on the north by a high smooth wall of rock. In this there was a high arched cavern.

Out of this rolled the sluggish current of the Sahara river.

As the voyagers gazed into the depths of the black mouthed cavern they felt a queer thrill, partly of dread, partly of vague uncertainty.

From whence came this mighty volume of water? From what unknown chambers of the earth, and what was beyond that grim entrance?

Was it the threshold of an unknown world, a region never before visited by man? Who could tell what wonders might lie beyond?

The Venture crept nearer to the entrance. Then Frank turned on the search-light and sent its rays full into the dark depths.

They showed the black walls of the cavern arch, and a hundred yards farther on, a blank wall of rock. This was an abrupt angle in the passage.

What was beyond, could only be determined by entering, so the Venture glided ahead.

"Take your last look at the sky for a long while," cried Frank; "there's no telling when we may come out of here."

Involuntarily all obeyed, and the next moment they were in the dark cavern. On glided the Venture and turned the angle.

This only showed another beyond, and this being turned, showed another, and so on through the depths of the cavern. For hours the Venture crept on, deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth.

Thus far there had been plenty of space between the surface of the water and the roof of the cavern, but suddenly the roof of the cavern began to lower.

This reminded Frank that it would be well to ship the two masts, which was done, they being lowered to the deck. As they proceeded, the roof of the cavern seemed to constantly lower.

Finally there were but a few feet between it and the roof of the cabin. Frank gave the signal.

"We shall have to travel under water now," he declared; "it is lucky for us that we have a submarine boat else we could go no further!"

Barney sank the boat, and the voyagers now for the first time saw the bed of the underground river.

It was not so easy picking the way along under water, for the current was at times very powerful, and it required all the strength of the engines to drive the boat ahead.

This, of course, made progress slow. The only way of reckoning the hours of sunset and sunrise now, of course, was by means of the chronometer. For fully three days the submarine boat groped its way through the passage.

This began to wax irksome as well as monotonous, and M. Brosseau declared:

"It is very strange that we do not meet with some change. Is there no subterranean chamber or cavity anywhere on the course of this river?"

"We have traveled one hundred miles," declared Frank, "and if we were to encounter such a change it is full time."

"I have noted one peculiar fact."

"What?"

"The force and volume of the water has not decreased a particle."

"That is true."

"It is easy to see what that implies!"

"That it is a big river and that we are yet a good ways from its source."

"Just so!"

"Well," declared Frank, vigorously, "we will follow it to its source if it takes a lifetime. Once undertaken we will not abandon a project."

"I am glad that is your resolution, Mr. Reade. But indeed I cannot but believe that we will ere long reach some part of the river which will enable us to again go to the surface!"

"There is no doubt of that!"

"Ah!"

Both men gave a violent start. Barney from the pilot house shouted down into the cabin:

"Shure, Misther Frank, wud yez cum here quick!"

Both Frank and Brosseau, with one leap, bounded into the pilot house. A strange glare of light blinded them.

"What is it, Barney?" cried Frank.

"Shure, sor, it's moighty hard to tell, but I should say it was a foire undher the water."

"A fire!" cried Frank.

Then he and Brosseau rushed to the window and shaded their eyes. An astounding scene met their gaze.

They had emerged at last from the tedious channel passage. They could see that they were in some large body of water, probably an underground lake or sea.

But the surprising thing was the fact that to the right there was a broad face of stone, and against it there blazed a dazzling light.

The search-light was focused far away into the depths of the lake, but Frank, nevertheless, shut it off to make sure that it was not the cause of the illumination.

But it was easy to see that it was not, for the light against the wall was now more powerful than ever. It covered a space of many square yards, and was as if the rock was luminous.

"That is queer!" declared Brosseau. "What do you make of it, Monsieur Reade? It cannot be real fire."

"Certainly not," replied Frank. "We will get nearer."

Barney edged the boat nearer to the rock. It was now seen that the light was emitting and yet constant. Brosseau gave a cry.

"I see it now!" he shouted; "it is phosphorus!"

"Phosphorus!" exclaimed Frank.

"Yes, the precipitation is very powerful. In that rock there are all the necessary chemicals to make the peculiar light."

"But the water, sor?" asked Barney.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the savant; "it is the water which brings out the phosphorescence. I doubt if you would see the rock as luminous if it were not for the water."

It was truly a curious freak of nature. The voyagers regarded it for some while with interest.

But other wonders now claimed their attention. The submarine boat was turned away.

The force of the river current was not now felt at all. So the Venture easily glided on her way through the waters of the underground lake.

The search-light was now used to its full limit. The far depths of the lake were brought to scrutiny.

Frank proposed to first explore the bed of the lake. Then they might rise to the surface, for he believed that the cavern chamber was high arched and far above the surface of the water.

The bed of the lake seemed to consist of hard gravel and there was no sign of aquatic growth, and but few fish, these being small. But as the boat crept on over the sandy floor, Brosseau suddenly exclaimed:

"Wait, Monsieur Reade, I believe I have made a discovery!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank. "What may it be?"

"As near as I can guess there is a section of very even stone pavement under us, monsieur!"

"Stone pavement?"

"Yes, Monsieur Reade," declared the Frenchman, somewhat excitedly. "And what is of greater importance is the likelihood that it could only have been laid by human hands."

CHAPTER V.

THE SUBTERRANEAN ISLE.

THIS most astonishing declaration of Brosseau's gave Frank a genuine shock. For a moment he knew not what to say.

Not until the Frenchman had spoken again impatiently did he recover himself.

"If you please, monsieur, I would like to investigate, if you will kindly stop the boat!"

"Most certainly!" declared Frank, coming out of his spell; "you gave me a great surprise, Brosseau!"

Then he motioned to Barney who brought the boat to a dead stop. Then it was lowered and rested on the bottom.

The search-light was focused upon the bed of the lake contiguous to the submarine boat. An astonishing discovery was the result.

For a certain fact a line of stone pavement existed just under the boat. It extended far into the distance, was about forty feet in width and seemed to have been once used as a street or road. Here was an astounding discovery.

It was plain that none but human hands could have laid that pavement. In this case a startling fact was proved.

This part of the subterranean river had once been above water. It had even afforded a home for human beings. These facts were undeniable.

But on the other hand, were these unknown beings cavern dwellers, an underground race who had never seen the light of the sun? Or had this part of the cavern once been above ground and on the level of the Upper Sahara? All these questions presented themselves.

A harder problem it was indeed hard to imagine. Brosseau was a man of science and of wide knowledge, but he owned himself puzzled.

"It is beyond my ken," he declared. "It exceeds all the won-

ders I have ever discovered. But let us look on further. We may find an explanation."

The Venture was raised a few feet and went ahead slowly. The paved roadway was followed carefully and subjected to the closest kind of a scrutiny.

It extended for a long ways under the underground lake. Then suddenly our voyagers became aware of a startling fact.

They had all the while been ascending, and now, to their amazement, actually came up from the depths of the lake to its surface.

What was more, the roadway did the same, and an unknown area of land lay before the discoverers, under the high roof of the mighty cavern. This island in the subterranean lake, for such it seemed to be, was of considerable proportions.

And as the search-light flashed across it, another startling fact was revealed. This was that there were ruins of ancient buildings upon the isle. Here was indeed a discovery.

"By jove," exclaimed Frank, "we have indeed hit upon a wonderful discovery! This is proof of the existence at one time of a subterranean race of people."

"I discredit that," said Brosseau.

"What," exclaimed Frank, in surprise, "in face of all this evidence?"

Brosseau nodded.

"I do not believe that an underground race would have raised such buildings," he declared. "In the first place they never needed them, for the roof of this great cavern is sufficient cover. All knowledge of cave dwellers, which I have ever gained, will bear out this supposition."

"Well!" exclaimed Frank in amazement, "how are you going to explain the presence of these ruins here? How could they have been transported here from the light of day?"

"It looks very strange," said Brosseau, "but there is surely some natural and rational explanation. We will find it before we get through!"

"Do you fancy that an earthquake could have accomplished this?"

"Some such revulsion of nature must have done it. There are many strange things under the sun!"

"I will admit that," said Frank, "but I must own that this puzzles me!"

"There are many theories concerning the Sahara," said Brosseau. "One favorite one is, that it was once the bed of a mighty ocean. That the earth's crust rose and the waters departed into the Atlantic and Indian oceans."

"This is all seemingly logical until one recalls the fact that in all the Sahara no signs of former marine life, not even a tiny fossil shell can be found. If it were once the bed of a great ocean, then many of these bits of evidence would certainly have to be found."

"But my theory is that once upon a time the region of the Sahara was a fertile and well populated land. But some great evolution of nature swept an ocean of sand, as shifting as snow, across it. This increased so rapidly that the inhabitants were obliged to abandon their cities and towns and flee to some different quarter of the world."

"This created the Great Desert, which kept expanding until it has covered a region fully as large as the United States of America. It has driven civilization, barbarism, and all else from its borders. Those who travel the Sahara now do so at the risk of life."

"Then this ruined town must far antedate the Sahara itself," said Frank with interest.

"Certainly," agreed Brosseau, "it far antedates it. Truly it is a wonderful discovery, and proves much of the hitherto vaguely known history of the Sahara."

"I should say so! But enough of this. What say you if we take a turn ashore and a look over the subterranean island?"

"Delighted!" cried Brosseau. "I am yours to command."

Preparations were quickly made; the scientist took his geological tools with him. But neither went armed, for it was not deemed necessary.

The submarine boat was able to approach near enough to the jutting shore to throw out a plank. This they crossed and stood upon the shores of the subterranean island.

It was a curious sensation. They would have been in utter darkness but for the search light.

This, however, threw a powerful glare across the isle. Frank led the way over the rocks to a firm spot of earth.

A wonderful scene was spread to view.

There were ruins of what had once been a town of some considerable size. These were fast crumbling into dust.

This was evidence of their extreme antiquity. Thousands of years no doubt this buried city of the Sahara had found its tomb here.

It was a wonderful thing to reflect upon and Brosseau was deeply impressed. He made copious notes and also secured a number of valuable specimens.

But there were no remains of human beings or their utensils or any other article. Nothing save the crumbling stone and the outlines of the town.

The fate of these ancient people was a sealed book. It would never be known.

The air of the subterranean isle was damp and oppressive. It affected the two explorers not a little, and finally it was deemed advisable to return to the Venture.

But just as they had decided upon this move a startling thing happened. Suddenly and without a moment's warning they were in utter darkness.

Frank clutched Brosseau's arm.

"What is that?" he ejaculated. "Can you see?"

"Not a thing!"

"What has happened?"

The search-light has become extinguished. That leaves us in the dark!"

"True!" cried Frank, "but the boat and her lights—my soul! We are lost, Brosseau. Something has certainly happened to the boat!"

For a moment the two men were horror-struck as this possibility dawned upon them.

It certainly meant their doom if such was the case. But they clung to hope.

"The light may have become extinguished temporarily," said Frank; "of course Barney and Pomp would not go off and leave us here. It will flash up again soon."

But Brosseau was incredulous.

"I don't believe it," he said, with a shrug; "did you hear anything like a muffled explosion when the light ceased?"

"I have a faint remembrance," said Frank, "but what could have exploded on board the Venture?"

"Oh, a hundred things may have happened. Who can tell? Have you anything like an idea of the points of the compass?"

"Yes," replied Frank. "I am now facing the spot where the light was last seen. If we can keep a straight course we can reach the gang plank—that is——"

"What?"

"If the boat is yet there."

Each drew a deep breath. But it was no time for squeamishness. They knew that their lives depended on the success of their undertaking. Should they fail to reach the gang plank or find it gone then they might face a fearful fate.

The isle would be their tomb. Nor would their fate be long deferred, for there was nothing on the isle upon which human beings could subsist.

Straight on they kept, feeling their way in the pitchy darkness. It was a tedious and fearful climb.

But they kept on and soon after clambering over some rocks, Brosseau said:

"Thank heaven! I can feel the water, Monsieur Reade. We have reached the shore!"

"Then shout!" said Frank. "Barney and Pomp should hear us." And shout they did, waking the echoes of the ghoully place. But no answer came. Nothing could be seen or heard.

All was the silence of the tomb. The two men were dazed.

What did it mean? What had happened to the Venture? Where had it gone and what had become of Barney and Pomp? Frank never had known them to fail him before.

Certainly they had never left in the submarine boat of their own volition. Frank knew this.

Something had undoubtedly befallen the craft. But what could it be? This was the serious question.

Meanwhile, the two men sat upon the rocks by the waterside, waiting and hoping to see the lights of the Venture once more.

And to add to the horror of their situation an appalling discovery was made. The water in the lake was rising.

Every moment it encroached upon the shores of the subterranean isle. It bid fair to completely swamp it.

In that case what of the two explorers? It would mean a fearful death by drowning.

Steadily the water rose. Frank and his companion were obliged to keep constantly changing their positions. And higher yet the water ran. Frank began to get anxious.

It was really a fearful thing to die like this, powerless to avert the awful fate.

CHAPTER VI.

BARNEY AND POMP IN A QUANDARY.

BUT what happened to the Venture, and why had she taken her sudden and mysterious departure? This is no doubt the problem which most interests the reader at this juncture.

After Frank and Brosseau had departed, Barney and Pomp were left to the performance of a number of quite arduous duties. Pomp was in the cooking galley and Barney in the engine room.

After a time the Celt thought he would just run down and see the coon for a few moments, and perhaps accept an invitation to sample some of his cooking, which was always par excellence.

"Hi, how yo' is, Marse Barney?" cried the coon pleasantly as the Celt appeared. "I done 'ot yo' wud show up afo' long."

"An' phoy did yez think that, naygur?" asked Barney.

"Ah done reckon yo' git a bit hungry an' hab to fin' somefing to eat. Help yo'self to dem crullers ober dere if yo' likes dem, an' dere am a bit ob braudy in dat flask on de shelf. Yo' am bery welcome, sah."

"Begorra, it's a brick yez are, naygur, to anticipate me wants!" declared Barney, stuffing his cheek full of the crullers and washing it down with the brandy.

"I ain' de wuss frien' you'se got, sah," averred Pomp, "fo' all yo' am bound to abuse me so much."

"Be me sowl, ye're laborin' undher a disallusion there, sor!" cried Barney. "I niver intintionally abused ye in me loife."

"Dat am a'right," sniffed Pomp. "Wha' yo' fink dat frog-eatin' Frenchman fin' on dat island, eh?"

"Begorra, I don't know. Shure I hope he'll lead Misther Frank into no koind av thrubble."

"Huh! Yo' leabe Marse Frank be. He done able to take keer ob hissef, an' don' yo' neber fear about it. I knows dat fo' a fae."

"Bejabbers, there's no man so smart but he's bound ter git into danger, sor!"

"Wha' am yo' doin' down here den if yo' hab any ob dem kin' of thoughts? You' oughter be up in de pilot house, sah, ready fo' a signal or any wo'd Marse Frank might send to yo'."

To tell the trnth Barney did feel secretly uneasy. He quickly got upon his feet.

"Yez may be roight, naygur," he agreed. "I'll be afther goin' up. Shure—tare an' ounds! phwat is that?"

There was a sudden terrific crash over their heads. The submarine boat plunged and swayed and shook from stem to stern.

Then there was a settling sensation, water swirled over the decks and the boat sank.

For a moment awful horror seized upon Barney as the possibility of the doors being open occurred to him. In such an event they would be drowned like rats in a trap.

Pomp sprung forward and the two clutched each other. In that moment they expected to see the great volume of water come rushing into the cabin.

But it did not come.

The boat had suddenly come to a stop. It had no doubt reached the bottom. They were safe.

For a moment both were too weak to act or speak. Then Barney managed to recover himself sufficiently to say:

"Howly murder! Phwat the devil was it, naygur?"

"Semeefing hab run aginst de boat and made it sink, I should fink!"

"Shure, there's no doubt yez are roight, naygur. We'll quick foind out!"

With which the Celt sprung up the stairs and into the pilot-house. A glance told the truth.

They were at the bottom of the lake. What was more they had slid away from the shore far enough so that they were in very deep water.

This was an unexpected and demoralizing discovery. For Barney had not yet ascertained the cause of the boat's sinking, and much feared that it was owing to some serious damage.

"Wha' kin yo' see, chile?" asked Pomp, dubiously. "We ain' sprung no leak, hab we?"

"Not unless it is in the tank, to be shure!" declared the Celt.

"An' den——"

"Shure, we're sthuck, an' here we may be loikely to stay for-iver!"

"I should fink yo' wud jes try fo' to fin' out 'bout dat, quick as eber yo' can!"

"I mean to, sor!" retorted Barney, "be jabers I ain't got mesilf turned around yet!"

The Celt leaped down into the tank room. He beheld what was an astounding fact.

The tank was empty.

It had not then sprung a leak, nor was it the cause of the boat's sinking. For a moment the Celt was dumfounded.

"On me worrud!" he muttered, "that's moighty quare. Shure there's some way to explain it all, but how?"

How could the boat sink without there being water in the tank? The Celt climbed back to the pilot house.

"Wha' yo' fin' out, chile?" asked Pomp.

"Shure there's niver a drop av wather in the tank!" declared Barney.

The coon's eyes opened wide.

"Wha' am dat yo' say?" he cried. "Wha' make de boat sink den?"

"Begorra, that's phwat I'd loike to know mesilf."

"Golly! I done wish Marse Frank was here," said Pomp, dolorously. "He berry quick fin' out wha' de mattah!"

"Well, he ain't here, yez black ape," growled Barney; "shure mebbe yez kin tell phwat's the matter yesilf."

"Huh! if I was de engineer I done reckon I cud," retorted Pomp.

Under other circumstances there would have been a ruction then and there. But Barney knew that the seriousness of the situation would admit of no trifling. So he said nothing but went up again into the pilot house.

It occurred to him to start the engines and see what the result would be. So he pressed the electric key.

There was a buzzing of the dynamos, the boat swayed and rocked a trifle, but nothing more. It seemed in the clutch of some powerful hand.

Barney turned to the search-light and swung it about so that the glare fell upon the rear deck of the boat. Then he beheld an astounding explanation of the whole thing.

There upon the rear deck was an enormous black mass. In fact the entire stern of the boat seemed deeply buried in it.

"Tare an' ounds," gasped the Irishman, "that's phwat is doin' the hull business! Shure, phwat is it?"

Upon closer inspection he saw that the Venture's stern was completely buried in a vast mound of earth and rock. This seemed to have fallen upon the boat's stern, and weighing so heavily had actually carried it to the bottom of the lake.

But from whence had come this landslide? Then Barney remembered that the subterranean cavern had, of course, a roof, from which this huge mass had doubtless become detached, and falling had carried the Venture down.

The mystery was explained.

But the dilemma was not yet relieved. The engines were not powerful enough to draw the boat out of this heap of debris, for the propeller itself was covered up.

Meanwhile, what must be the sensation of Frank and Mr. Brosseau, left in utter darkness upon the subterranean isle? How were they to know the fate of the Venture?

All these things occurred to Barney. The Celt was never in a state of greater perplexity or uncertainty.

Pomp now appeared and they discussed the situation. It was not an easy problem to solve.

"There's jist wan thing about it," declared the Celt, finally. "We must get worrur to Mither Frank in some way or other, an' at wanst. We niver kin get the boat out av this by ourselves."

"Yo' am right dar, I'ish! S'pose yo' put on one ob dem divin' suits an' goes up to de surface an' fin's Marse Frank?"

"Begorra I'll thry it av yez will kape things roight here."

"Ob co'se I will."

Barney opened a chest near by and took from it a diver's helmet, and also a square steel box which resembled a knapsack, and which had various tubes connecting with the helmet.

This was Frank Reade, Jr.'s diving suit of his own invention, and a vast improvement upon the ordinary apparatus.

The reason for this was that no life lines were required, and there was nothing to hamper the diver in going wherever his fancy might dictate.

The steel knapsack was in reality a chemical generator which acting upon the same principle as the generator aboard the Venture furnished the diver with plenty of air for an indefinite period, the foul air being expelled by means of a valve in the top of the helmet.

Upon the front of the helmet was a small but powerful bulb light supplied by a small storage battery in the knapsack. With heavy leaden soled shoes the apparatus was complete.

With it a man could travel an immense distance under water. It's advantage over the old diving armor must at once be seen.

Barney produced this armor and proceeded to don it.

In a few moments he was equipped and ready for the start. He now set forth to leave the cabin.

The question might now occur to the reader, how he was to accomplish this without flooding the boat with water? This problem had been solved by the inventor in a simple manner.

Connected with the steel door opening on deck was a vestibule. Stepping into this Barney closed the door of the cabin. He was now confined in the vestibule with a door opening in either direction, one upon the deck and the other to the cabin.

In the vestibule there was a pneumatic pump and a valve. Pressing the latter Barney flooded the vestibule. Then he opened the deck door and walked boldly out.

To return he would need simply to shut himself in the vestibule again, and by pressing a valve the pneumatic pump would force the water out of the vestibule in a very few moments. The device was ingenious yet very simple.

Barney thus let himself out of the cabin. Then he clambered over the rail and stood upon the bottom of the lake.

For a moment the pressure made him dizzy, but he quickly recovered from this and set out to reach the shore of the subterranean isle.

This he found no light task, for it was a fearful steep ascent, and the pressure of the water was powerful. But yet he kept on, clambering from rock to rock.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUE.

THE discovery by Frank and Brosseau that the water was rising over the isle was a startling one. They were for a few moments unable to understand the phenomenon.

Then Frank said:

"Brosseau, we are lost, unless we can find a way to return to the Venture!"

"Per Dieu! You don't mean that, Monsieur Reade?"

"Yes, I do. There is no doubt but that at periodical times this isle is covered with water. We shall drown!"

Aghast with this incontrovertible evidence, the savant was speechless. He sank down upon a shelving rock and felt sick and faint.

Some time elapsed.

Frank had been straining his gaze to catch some glimpse of the Venture or her lights. He could not even venture an accurate guess as to what her fate had been.

He was sure that something serious had occurred, for Barney and Pomp would never have deserted their post for any light reason.

Frank could think of nothing but that the boat had sprung a leak and gone down. In that event the fate of all was sealed, and would never be known to the world.

Buried alive in those fearful subterranean chambers, the very bowels of the earth, what could be worse? It made Frank's blood run icy cold and clammy perspiration to ooze from every pore.

"God help us!" he moaned. "It is a dreadful death!"

"Did you speak, monsieur?" asked Brosseau, suddenly.

"Only reverie," replied Frank. "But—ye gods! what is that? Am I right? Your eyes, Brosseau! Do they tell you the same? Yonder is a light!"

"A light!"

Brosseau sprang up and let forth a maniacal cry of joy. He leaped and danced in his delirium.

There was no doubt of it. A small star of light was dancing before their vision. It was some distance away, and Frank saw that it could not be one of the lights of the Venture.

Then his heart fluttered.

What if it was one of those curious phosphorescent lights which are so often seen in caverns, or maybe an ignis fatuus? Frank watched it rise and fall and waver with a curious fascination.

Then the hearts of both men gave a leap.

A distant faint shout came to them. The words were barely distinguishable.

"Mither Frank! phwere are yez?"

"Barney!" shouted Frank, leaping to his feet. "What, ho? Barney, lad, here we are?"

A joyful shout was the answer and the light came nearer. Frank and Brosseau did not wait but started towards it.

Nearer they drew and a few moments later Barney's panting form was revealed in the glare of the helmet lamp which he held in his hand.

That was a joyful meeting.

Explanations were quickly made.

"I knew that something of the sort must have happened," declared Frank, "but you are just in time, Barney. The water is rising over this isle fast and we would soon have been drowned."

"But what are we to do?" asked Brosseau; "how can we return to the boat?"

"One of us must go back for two diving suits," said Frank; "it is the only way. We will then devise a plan for liberating the Venture."

"Shure, sor, I'll go back at wanst," declared Barney. "It was sthupid of me not to 'ave brought thim wid me."

"Go then!" said Frank, excitedly. "And hurry on your life! There is no time to lose!"

Barney waited for no further orders but slid into the water. Down to the bottom of the lake he scrambled. Pomp was at the pilot house window.

He saw the Celt coming post haste and knew that something had happened. He waited eagerly for him to come aboard.

Into the vestibule Barney sprang. In a few moments he was in the cabin.

"Wha' am de mattah, chile?" cried the dorky; "did yo' find dem?"

"Shure, I did!" cried the Celt, "an' I'm afther two more divin' suits. I'll have no toime to spare!"

Pomp assisted the Celt in getting the suits, and then Barney once more left the Venture. He was soon clambering up the rocky heights again.

It was a joyful moment for Frank and Brosseau when the Celt came into view with the suits on his shoulders. It did not take them long to put them on.

Then all slid into the water and were quickly at the bottom of the lake. The Venture was plainly revealed, and they hastened to climb aboard.

But Frank did not go at once into the cabin.

He paused to examine the position of the Venture. He saw at once that it was a serious one.

The heap of rock and gravel could not be removed except by work of hand, and it would be an arduous task.

Moreover it was necessary that this should be done at once, for its weight was surely crushing the hull of the boat, and might at any moment start a leak.

Frank hurried back to the cabin and a consultation was held.

The result was that all donned diving suits and turned out with pick and shovel to do hard manual labor. It was the only course.

It was by no means easy work either, under that vast body of water; but they kept at it.

For hours they dug away at the mass, and then were gratified to see that the propeller was free and uninjured. The rest was easy.

A short while later the entire boat was released from its anchorage.

Frank had taken the precaution to fill the tank with water.

This he now hastily expelled and the Venture sprang to the surface; she was a trifle wrenched but practically uninjured.

There was no desire to linger longer in the vicinity, for there was no telling at what moment another landslide might fall.

So the Venture sped away over the surface of the underground lake; soon the overhead roof began to contract, and once more they entered the river channel.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Brosseau, "that experience was like a nightmare! I would not care to repeat it!"

"Indeed no," agreed Frank; "it was most unpleasant."

"What would be the result if the entire roof of that cavern should fall and choke up the river?"

"You are a geologist," said Frank; "you should be able to tell."

"My theory is that the river would either come to the surface and change its channel, or bore its way through the falling mass to the original channel."

"Which is no doubt correct," agreed Frank, "but do you think this river continues all of its course below the Sahara?"

"By no means. We are apt at any moment to emerge upon some part of its course above ground. The Sahara rivers have that propinquity of appearing and disappearing. Many a well hole or water hole in the desert, is but a breathing hole for an underground river. Now you can see the possibility of our scheme of regenerating the Sahara. Suppose we tap this river, dam its course, and throw it above ground

and through a hundred different sandy valleys, what a change there would be. The desert would then truly be made to bloom like a rose."

"There is logic in your theory," agreed Frank; "I hope you will succeed. Ah! what is this?"

Frank pressed back the electric lever and brought the Venture to a full stop.

There was abundant reason for this. It could be seen that the river here separated into two different channels.

This was the first time that such a thing had been encountered. It meant either that the river here divided itself about an island, or that this was a meeting of two rivers—one tributary to the other.

The problem for our voyagers to solve was as to which course they should take. It was a positive conundrum.

"Which shall it be, Brosseau?" asked Frank; "it shall be for you to decide."

"Indeed, I cannot say," replied the Frenchman. "Certainly the course to the right looks as good as that to the left."

"Then let us try the right," cried Frank. "We can do no more than experiment at any rate."

"Very good, M. Reade!"

So the submarine boat went to the right. The current now became much stronger.

In fact it required all the power of the engines to stem it. It ran with almost race-horse speed.

For two days the Venture struggled on against this adverse current and all the while under water, for the stream quite filled the underground passage.

Then, on the third day after having traveled seventy miles as Frank reckoned it, they came into a more sluggish current, and knew that they were upon higher ground.

M. Brosseau was in the observation tower, where he chanced to make a startling discovery. Far ahead he saw a gleam of light, for they were now traveling on the surface of the river.

He instantly shouted:

"Mon Dieu! Come quick, M. Reade. I have a discovery!"

Frank sprung into the tower at once. Brosseau pointed through the plate glass windows.

"Do you see?" he said.

Frank gave a mighty start.

"Daylight!" he exclaimed.

"Oui, monsieur!"

"We are coming out of the subterranean river!"

"That is the truth, monsieur. We shall soon behold the light of day once more."

It can hardly be said that any in the party regretted this. It would certainly be a grand relief as well as a delight to see the light of day once more.

So the spirits of the voyagers were high, and Frank cried:

"Put on all speed, Barney. Let us get there as quickly as possible."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OASIS.

But Barney needed no further incentive. He taxed the dynamos to their utmost.

And the Venture sped forward with great speed. Every moment the patch of daylight grew larger.

"Be me sowl!" cried the Celt, "it will be loike a glimpse av Paradise to see the sun on the sky wanst more. Phwat do yez say, naygur?"

"Golly, I'se ob de same 'pinyun, chile," declared the coon. "I jes' laik fo' to put mah fut on de solid yarth once mo'."

"Well, I'll agree that you shall have a chance," declared Frank, "if we find that we are in a safe locality."

This was joyful anticipation for Barney and Pomp. And on raced the Venture.

As the opening was approached a vista beyond opened to the gaze of the voyagers.

There was a broad expanse of water showing a lake, or widening of the river, at least. The shore, dimly distant, showed a line of waving palms.

"An oasis, beyond a doubt," declared M. Brosseau; "but we shall soon see."

And this proved a fact. The submarine boat suddenly shot out into open air and the scene spread before the voyagers for a moment blinded them.

The Soudan sun beat down hot and pitiless upon the lagoon or basin of water, which was surrounded upon all sides by grassy slopes and green palms.

The glare of light it was which blinded the voyagers. But this was soon overcome.

Then they looked about them with deep interest.

That this was an oasis or water hole in the mighty desert there was no doubt. The fringe of palms about it hid the great sea of sand from view at that moment.

Brosseau was eager and excited.

He took in all the points of the compass and began to enlarge upon the possibilities of irrigating canals being built out from this very oasis.

"Millions of acres can be flooded by these subterranean rivers," he declared. "I am now better satisfied than ever of the practicability

of the scheme. By the way, M. Reade, I should much enjoy being set ashore by and by. I would like to take a look at the desert."

"Your wish shall be gratified," replied Frank; "and as soon as you please."

"Well, I suppose the sooner the better."

"Very well!"

The Venture was steered in nearer the shore. Then a gangplank was thrown out and touched the sands.

The Venture drew so little water that this was always easy to accomplish, and saved the launching of a boat.

"First," said Frank, "we had better make sure that the oasis has no other occupants. If we were spied by a troop of Bedouins now, they might make it disagreeable for us."

"You are right," agreed the savant; "it is well to proceed with care."

So Frank and Barney, armed with rifles went ashore first. They took a look through the palm grove.

There was plenty of evidence of visitations to the oasis. There were remains of former camps and the debris of a caravan, but nothing more. No living being other than themselves was visible.

This settled the matter.

The submarine boat was safe at its anchorage, so even Pomp came ashore. Then exploration of the oasis was made.

There were marks to show that this was a common stopping place for desert travelers. Many a caravan had slaked its thirst in this pool, beyond a doubt.

It was nice and cool under the shade of the palms and by the water. But just beyond the fringe of green, the mighty expanse of glistening sand extended as far as the eye could reach.

It was a mighty spectacle, and showed what an enormous part of the earth's surface was thus rendered of no use to man or beast.

"But it shall be reclaimed," declared Brosseau, enthusiastically. "You shall see. France will have a mighty empire here yet!"

"Well," said Frank, "as well as I can figure it, we have traveled a long ways under this waste of sand. We must be well into the heart of the desert."

"Yes," agreed Brosseau, "and our theory of the ramification of these rivers below the Sahara, is proven correct."

"Is that all, then, that our mission calls for?" asked Frank.

"By no means. We have not yet been able to judge the extent. Moreover, we must determine the best spot for perverting the main channel of the great Sahara River!"

"That will be a bit difficult, won't it?" asked Frank.

"I think not, with the aid of the submarine boat and yourself."

"I hope we shall be able to accomplish all purposes."

"I have no doubt of it!"

Barney and Pomp had been gathering dates from the palms and otherwise enjoying themselves. In fact, the voyagers had been so deeply engrossed in this part of the oasis that they had given no thought to any other part of it.

And so it happened that they did not see a body of horsemen coming up on the other side out of the desert.

They were fierce-looking Arabs, and their hawk-like visages were sunburned almost to Ethiopian blackness, while their horses staggered in their gallop.

They were armed to the teeth, and were plainly a lawless crew of Bedouin plunderers in quest of prey. Though they were also unaware of the presence of others in the oasis.

So that they rode down to the edge of the pool to water their horses before they became aware of the fact. Then they saw the Venture floating near the opposite shore.

For a moment the Bedouins rubbed their eyes in sheer amazement. They could not believe their sight.

What could a boat of such proportions be doing in this lonely lagoon of the oasis? Moreover, how could it have got there?

"By the soul of Allah!" quoth the leader, Mahmoud Ali, as he pulled his black beard. "Am I dreaming, or is it a truth?"

"I see the same as thyself, sire," said his confere, Suleiman Baraki, as he shaded his eyes. "It is a floating craft like unto those we see in the Nile or the Red Sea."

"Allah defend us!" resumed the Bedouin chief. "See you any sign of man about her, Suleiman, brother?"

"Not so," replied the other Arab. "It may be the mirage—yet, no! It is too near. Ah! the boat has come up from the depths of the earth through the lost river which feeds this oasis, sire!"

The sheik smote the jeweled hilt of his sword.

"Right, noble brother," he replied; "that is the story. It is the floating home of some foreign prince of a people strange to us, and who may live under the earth. What say you?"

"The noble sheik has the perception and second sight of a great prophet," replied Suleiman. "What shall be his next orders?"

Sheik Mahmoud drew himself up proudly, and his eye flashed with the fire of a true conqueror.

"There is nothing in the desert which does not belong to the Bedouin," he said. "Allah has said so. The underground prince must pay homage to Sheik Mahmoud."

The sheik reined his horse back and drew his jeweled yataghan. He flashed it before his followers, flinging excited Arabic at them.

In a moment the cavalcade, jaded though they were, began the circuit of the pool.

And all this while our voyagers were beyond sight and hearing, engaged in listening to M. Brosseau's elaborate theories of reclamation.

The Arabs quickly made a circuit of the lagoon. They drew rein by the plank which led to the deck of the Venture.

It was an undoubted surprise to them to meet with no resistance or to encounter no person. For a moment the sheik was puzzled.

He dismounted from his horse and approached the plank. Suleiman was quickly by his side.

"There seems to be nobody within this strange boat, noble brother," he said.

"Right, Sheik," replied Suleiman, "it is likely that they are all ashore, perhaps in some other part of the oasis."

The suggestion seemed to give the sheik an inspiration. He turned and shouted:

"Hyder, you and a dozen of good men scour the palm grove. Bring all you find to me alive. Do not slay them, or it will cost you your life!"

"I hear, noble sheik!"

Away sped the deputation, and Sheik Mahmoud begun to cross the plank. He was quickly on the deck of the Venture.

A score of his men were with him. A more villainous looking crew could not be imagined.

The sheik opened the cabin door and passed in. The result was to him a most startling surprise.

The cabin was richly furnished, and to him seemed a palace. He looked about him with glittering eyes. Where was the good Genii which had put this prize into his grasp?

With the unction of the true Arab he proceeded to take possession of his prize. His men would have ransacked the boat, but he forbade it sternly.

"This is given Mahmoud by Allah for his palace!" he declared. "In it we shall sail to those regions in the center of the earth where the skies are of jasper and the mountains of onyx and pearl. Great is Allah! Noble is the Sheik Mahmoud!"

The servile followers bowed to the deck. And thus the noble Mahmoud took possession of the Venture.

And while all this was going on the unsuspecting real owners of the craft were still at the verge of the desert listening to M. Brosseau's visions of a reclaimed Sahara.

Better it would have been for them indeed if they had left at least one of their party aboard the submarine boat. The failure to do so had resulted seriously.

Brosseau was in the middle of a grand peroration when a startling thing occurred.

Suddenly the thud of horses' hoofs burst upon their hearing, and down through the palms there came riding a troop of Bedouins.

With flashing scimeters and ready guns they came in a half circle cutting off retreat to the lagoon. For a moment the voyagers were too startled to act.

Then Barney cried:

"Murder! they're atween us an' the Venture, sor! Phwat shall we do? Shure it's a foight we'll have!"

"We are lost!" gasped Brosseau.

"Steady!" cried Frank, commandingly; "don't fire a shot without my orders! Let us see first what these fellows want!"

The Bedouins had drawn rein and Hyder, their leader, was making a salaam over his saddle.

CHAPTER IX.

MAHMOUD ALI GETS A DUCKING.

FRANK had acquired a smattering of the Arabic language during a sojourn at one time in the city of Damascus. Therefore he managed to partly understand the words of the Bedouin lieutenant.

"In the name of Sheik Mahmoud, I call upon you to surrender. It is the will of Allah!" was the substance of Hyder's demand.

Frank gathered this much and then made reply:

"Who is Sheik Mahmoud?"

"The chosen of Allah, prince of the sun and lord of the desert," replied Hyder, grandiloquently; "throw thyself upon his most gracious mercy, noble sire!"

"Zounds!" cried Frank, angrily, "give my throat to an assassin's knife. I warn you not to interfere with us. We have the Sultan's ukase, and he will have your head if you trouble us!"

Hyder only grinned.

"The Sultan is a good ways from here," he said; "he rules not the Bedouin!"

"Well," cried Frank boldly, "you shall not block our path! Be off and tell your sheik that we will not accept his terms!"

But Hyder sat statue-like on his horse. There was a grim smile on his lips.

"My master's commands I must obey in the name of Allah!" he said. "I am told to bring you to Mahmoud alive!"

Frank saw that argument was out of the question. The fellow was quite unreasonable.

What was to be done?

He realized the gravity of the situation; in fact, that it was most desperate. He was anxious to get back to the Venture immediately.

A chill came over him as it occurred that possibly the rascally crew had taken possession of the Venture.

"My soul!" he exclaimed as he turned to Brosseau, "I believe we are ruined! We ought not to have left the Venture unguarded!"

"Do you believe that it is now in their possession, M. Reade?"

"I fear so."

"Then we are lost!"

"That looks to be the truth. However, we can make a fight——"

"Against such odds? It would be madness. We might kill a few of them but they would sweep us out of existence like chaff."

This was true as Frank could plainly see. The guns of the Bedouins already covered them.

Certainly the situation was most desperate; what could be done? Frank weighed the question slowly.

Hyder had grown impatient and spoke to two of his men who dismounted and advanced. Frank turned to his companions, and said:

"There are only two things left for us to do; sell our lives or surrender! Which is best?"

"Beggara, I'd loike to give them wan good shot onyway," declared Barney; "they'll be afther killin' us intoirely in the end!"

"Golly! I got mah eye on one ob dem debbils," declared Pomp.

"Oh, if we only had cover," groaned Frank, "but we are wholly at their mercy. Only the sands of the desert are about us!"

"That is true," said Brosseau gravely, "and on the whole I believe it is best to surrender!"

"You do?"

"Oui, monsieur!"

"Why do you think so?"

"There is the only bare chance for life. We will no doubt be taken before this sheik. He may give us our freedom. At any rate we may get a chance to turn the tables on him."

Frank drew a deep breath.

"Brosseau!" he said. "You are right. We will surrender!"

So Frank held up his hand to Hyder and said in broken Arabic:

"If we surrender, Effendi, what are your terms?"

"I can make none, sire," replied the Bedouin, "but my master the sheik is a merciful man. You need not fear him."

Frank bowed and said:

"Then we will surrender!"

"Effendi is wise!"

In a few seconds their arms were taken away from them and between guards they were marched away through the oasis.

When they came to the shores of the lagoon they saw that the submarine boat was in the possession of the motley crew.

Frank smiled grimly.

"That will do them little good," he reflected. "They could never operate the machinery."

But yet they might destroy it as well as the crew, as he well knew. This was the exigency to be feared. But the young inventor's brain was busy revolving a strategic plan.

If only some opportunity would now offer itself, how quickly he would be able to turn the tables. The best that could be done now, however, was to cling to hope.

And this he never abandoned.

The prisoners were taken over the plank aboard the Venture. Here the situation savored a little of the comical.

The Sheik had installed himself in the cabin, upon an improvised throne, in the shape of a plush easy chair. His lieutenants were grouped about him like the court favorites of a king.

And the prisoners were received as if they were vassals of some mighty dignitary, whose word could cut off their heads, which latter was literally true.

"By Jupiter!" thought the young inventor; "here is a pretty how d'ye do! What will be the end of it?"

The sheik received the prisoners with pompous dignity. Frank was the only one who could speak Arabic, so he banished the others to the after cabin, in which they were placed and the door closed upon them.

Then Frank was closely catechised by the sheik. The latter was much disappointed when he learned that the voyagers were not from any subterranean kingdom, with its skies of jasper and mountains of onyx and pearl.

"We are traveling under the protection of the Sultan," declared Frank, "and it would be better for you, sheik, not to molest us."

"Bah!" ejaculated Mahmoud, contemptuously. "The Sultan has no power over the Arab of the free desert. But Effendi shall lose his head if he does not serve Mahmoud truly."

Frank affected servility.

"In what can thy servants please thee, sheik?" he asked.

"You shall be master of this, my ship," declared the sheik. "I also would like to sail down the underground river and into the Niger. My men know not how to sail this boat. On this condition I will grant thee thy life."

"The sheik is gracious," replied Frank, still playing his part well. "I will accept his generous terms."

Mahmoud arose.

"Then let the start be made at once," he commanded. "Hyder, see thou to the horses and let ten of my best men abide with me on this voyage. Then thou and the others go back to the tents of our people in the valley of Kedar and wait my return. Go!"

Hyder prostrated himself and then sped away.

A few moments later ten only of the armed Arabs stood on the deck of the Venture. Now, more than ever, Frank felt sure of his ability to turn the tables.

Hyder and his men galloped away with the horses. Frank went into the pilot house and started the boat.

Then Mahmoud came out of the cabin to see the passing scene. As the boat glided across the smooth waters he was delighted.

It was a novel sensation for him, for his life had been spent in the saddle, and he knew nothing of boats. He was beside himself with joy.

And so were his companions. They hastened to arrange a seat

for him under one of the awnings. But his security was a fancied one.

For in the pilot house Frank Reade, Jr., was chuckling at his success in having so skillfully duped the wily Arab. He held it in his power at this moment to at once rid himself of his captors.

One of the Arabs had gone into the cabin after something for the sheik. When he emerged, this placed all of the rascally gang on deck.

Frank laughed outright as he pressed the key which closed the windows and doors. It was not to be supposed that Sheik Mahmoud knew that the Venture was a submarine boat.

"Safe!" muttered Frank. "Now take a swim, all of you!"

With which he opened the tank valve. There was a rush of water—the boat swayed and went down.

Every Arab, Mahmoud Ali and his throne, all were swept overboard like chaff.

The transition must have been a startling and inexplicable one to them. They floundered in the deep water of the lagoon, and such as managed to gain the shore, saw the Venture a moment later reappear and glide away into the upper cavern from whence issued the waters of the lagoon.

And this was the last they saw of it.

Sheik Mahmoud's brief dream of grandeur was dissipated all in one brief and startling moment.

For our voyagers it was a most fortunate escape. Their captor was one fully capable of beheading them all upon impulse, so they were lucky to be out of his reach.

Barney was so delighted that he stood on his head, and Pomp likewise.

"Bejabers, I thought we wor food fer the buzzards thiz," he cried. "Shure, it's a bad lot they wor!"

"Yo' am right, chile! I done fo't dis chile's goose was cooked fo' a suttin' fac'."

"It was a close call," laughed Frank. "And yet we fooled them easily enough in the end."

"We all owe our lives to you, Monsieur Reade!" declared Brosseau.

"I had given up all for lost!"

"It never pays to do that," said Frank. "I knew that we would be all right when he appointed me to sail the craft."

"Be jabers, it's the fust wash some av thim have had fer one whoile," declared Barney. "Of that I'm mighty sure!"

But the submarine boat had now entered once more upon her subterranean voyage. It was necessary to once more make use of the electric lights.

The river passage now grew narrower and soon the boat was between narrow walls. But after some hours travel through this sort of passage, they once more expanded, and finally the Venture glided into what seemed to be another subterranean lake.

This covered an area of many acres, and it was somewhere before the Venture came to its end. Then once more the voyagers were in the river.

CHAPTER X.

STRANDED.

FOR days the Venture glided onward through the subterranean river without any material change or incident worthy of note.

The exploration thus far had proved a success beyond Brosseau's most sanguine expectations. Yet he had never once thought of turning back.

He had a resolute desire to penetrate to the very source of the Sahara river. Where this could be he could not even hazard a guess.

The immense volume of water had not decreased a particle. It still flowed on as resistlessly as ever.

"There must be some immense reservoir somewhere in the heart of the desert," declared Frank; "its supply seems inexhaustible."

"And what a curious thing that beneath such an arid region there should be so much water," said Brosseau. "It is only another argument in favor of reclaiming the Sahara."

"In which I hope you will succeed," said Frank; "though it looks to me like a mighty project."

Days passed into a week. Still the source of the Sahara River seemed as far away as ever.

But one morning, or the beginning of a new day, for day was only known by the chronometer, there came a change. Again Barney spied light ahead.

Once more there seemed a likelihood of spending some time in the open air. The voyagers were not sorry.

The cavern arch enlarged greatly as they traveled on. It was full fifty feet in the clear when suddenly daylight shed its radiance about the boat.

As soon as the voyagers became accustomed to the light, they saw that the expanse of a mighty inland sea was about them.

Astonished beyond measure, Brosseau gazed upon the spectacle.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "this is on no map of the Sahara! Are we in another world, Monsieur Reade?"

"Well, this is a surprise," replied Frank; "there is certainly no record of the existence of such a body of water in this part of the world!"

Only the southern coast of this mighty sea could be seen. Everywhere else land was out of sight.

A dim haze like that of the ocean hung upon the horizon. Certainly this great inland sea must cover hundreds of square miles.

Here was indeed a mighty discovery. There was no record of such

a body of water in any history or upon any chart. This must be unexplored territory.

However, our voyagers were not sorry to accept it as such. To them belonged the honor of first discovery.

The Venture sailed on into the unknown sea. Then Frank suggested that bearings be taken.

"I have some curiosity to know just where we are," he declared.

"Good!" cried M. Brosseau, "that is to be approved of."

So Frank brought out his instruments and began to make his reckoning. Somewhere later he announced.

"We are almost upon the twentieth parallel of North Latitude and in the very heart of the Sahara."

"Then there is no human habitation within many hundreds of miles?"

"None."

"Good," said Brosseau, rubbing his hands delightedly. "The reclamation of the Sahara is certainly feasible. See what a reservoir of water this is to draw from."

"It would seem inexhaustible," replied Frank.

"Certainly!"

The Venture sailed on for some hours across the great sea, but yet no northern coast hove into view.

Frank was mightily puzzled.

"It is very queer," he declared. "Certainly this part of the desert has been reached by explorers. Why no mention of this lake has been made is strange!"

"Not at all," declared Brosseau, stoutly. "What more logical than that it should have been mistaken for Lake Tchad, which is only a few degrees below us?"

"Do you imagine such a possibility as that the underground system of rivers may also be connected with Lake Tchad?" asked Frank.

"It is not improbable," replied Brosseau, "but to establish that fact would be gaining a great point. Now, you can see what it means to have acquired a thorough knowledge of the underground topography of the Sahara."

"Indeed I do," agreed Frank, "it really means a great deal!"

But the day was drawing rapidly to a close.

The sun went down into a cloud of haze like a red ball of fire. On the desert there is no twilight.

So it was at once dark. The haze seemed to resolve itself into mist, which hung over the great lake, making a most profound blackness.

Even the search-light could penetrate it but a short ways, so that Frank decided to anchor and wait for the break of another day.

As the air was exceedingly damp the voyagers did not sit out late upon the deck and retired early.

Pomp was left on watch.

The darky paced the deck until a couple of hours past midnight when he was relieved by Barney.

The Celt several times went to the rail and looked over into the water. He saw its glistening surface as he supposed and looked for nothing more.

But one fact impressed him curiously. For some reason or other the boat had ceased to sway and rock with the motion of the lake.

To be sure this motion had been a gentle one, yet it was perceptible. But it had ceased.

"Bejabers, the say is mighty calm," muttered the Celt, and then dismissed the matter from his mind.

The hours passed, and toward morning the mist began to lift. The Celt saw a white, glistening expanse about him.

"Be me sowl, how quare the wather looks!" he muttered and rubbed his eyes. Then he went to the rail.

One glance was enough.

A loud shout pealed from his lips. It was like a trumpet call.

"Tare an' 'ounds!" he screamed. "Phwat the divil has done all this? Shure there's no wather to be seen at all—at all!"

His loud cry had aroused Frank, who, however, had been just about to come on deck. The young inventor suddenly appeared on the scene.

"What is the matter, Barney?" he cried.

"Shure, sor, yez kin see fer yerself."

Frank gave a start of amazement.

"On my word," he exclaimed, "that is inexplicable. What has happened?"

He rubbed his eyes and looked again and again. There was no denying the fact; his sight did not deceive him.

The lake was gone!

In its place was a vast expanse of dripping sand, rapidly turning to powder in the heated rays of the sun. The lake had mysteriously vanished.

The submarine boat rested in the midst of this expanse, which extended as far as the eye could reach on either hand.

For a moment Frank could not believe his senses.

It seemed to him that it must be all a strange dream. He tried to arouse himself from it.

But the stern reality was there.

The lake was gone, and they were stranded in the midst of the great Sahara.

At this moment Frank heard a gurgling exclamation at his shoulder. He turned to see Brosseau gazing wildly about him.

"Is it true?" gasped the savant; "do I see aright?"

"You do!" replied Frank; "the big lake is gone!"

"And we are stranded?"

"Yes?"

For a few moments Brosseau walked up and down the deck like one under the influence of a spell. Finally, however, he became more composed and then approached Frank.

"What do you make of it?" he asked, with a strange, burning light in his eyes.

"Simply what we can see," declared the young inventor; "the lake has subsided and left us!"

"But—the cause?"

"That we can only guess at. Probably it escaped by the giving way of some obstacle, maybe a ridge of land or some underground passage."

"Will it return?"

Frank shook his head.

"I doubt it," he said.

"Why?"

"Well, as near as I can reckon this lake was nothing but an overflow anyway. Some landslide may have checked the river channel and diverted the waters until a new outlet was found or the old channel was cleared."

This was logical.

Brosseau saw it and groaned.

"Then our project is ruined!" he declared. "We can never get the boat back to the river!"

"I see no way to do it!" replied Frank.

"In that case—what?"

"We must stay here!"

"And never get back to our home and friends?"

"I will not say that. My plan is to wait a reasonable length of time for the lake to return, if so be it is transient. If it does not return then we must abandon the boat and try to make our way across the desert as best we can."

Brosseau shook his head in a dismal way.

"We can never do it," he said.

"Why not?"

"I know what travel is in this awful wilderness of sand. We should perish. Only the hardest of men, long used to it can travel across the Sahara, and then only with fleet horses or camels."

Frank knew as well as Brosseau the terrible desperation of their position. He knew that the chances were powerfully against them.

Too late he regretted having left the river channel. This was the very worst calamity which could have befallen them.

In the face of it all he would have been justified in giving way to utter and absolute despair.

But he did not.

His was not that sort of a disposition. He paced the deck trying to study up a plan.

Stranded in the Great Sahara! He knew their supply of water was limited. It could be a question of but a few days anyway.

But perhaps the lake would return. To this hope the voyagers clung as their sheet anchor.

CHAPTER XI.

ONCE MORE UNDERGROUND.

THE sun by noon had dried the sands to the consistency of powder. What was more a long low lying cloud of yellow had appeared in the southwest.

Brosseau shivered as he looked at it.

"Do you know what that means, Monsieur Reade?" he asked.

"What?"

"If the wind veers more into the south it may come here. The deadly simoon or hot air storm. We will either be stifled or buried in sand."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Frank. "And yet you believe that this region is the best part of the world?"

"Not at present, but after reclamation!" replied the scientist.

The possibility of being overtaken by the sandstorm was another bugbear for our voyagers.

Frank had considered a hundred plans. But none of them had seemed to him feasible.

It would be a great blow to him to be obliged to leave the submarine boat in the desert. It represented much of value to him.

But there seemed no way of transporting it to the water side. He had thought of enlisting a train of elephants or camels to drag it thither.

But to secure these animals was evidently out of the question. More than that it was doubtful if the boat would not open a seam or spring a leak in being dragged such a distance.

The more he thought about the matter the more convinced Frank became that the Sahara expedition had reached its end.

The outlook was exceedingly poor for them to get out of the scrape even with their lives. If they could succeed in doing this they would be lucky.

So he decided at once that it would be imperatively necessary to abandon the boat.

He called the others into the cabin and a general conference was held. There could be but one result.

It was decided to adopt Frank's plan. Accordingly preparations were made to abandon the Venture. It was a gloomy outlook and all felt consequent depression of spirits.

But they were prevented from leaving the Venture as soon as they expected by the simoon, which seemed certain now to come their way.

The long, yellow cloud had crept up to the zenith and obscured the

sun. Then a long line of white, like the foam crest of a tornado at sea, came sweeping across the desert sands.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Frank, "we are going to get a howler!"

Only one thing saved the voyagers from the awful death blast. The submarine boat could be sealed hermetically, and the chemical generators furnished plenty of good, pure air.

But for this they would have been stifled as thousands of others had perished before. But the great blast of powdery sand sifted a shroud about the boat until it was nearly buried.

The storm lasted but a short while, but in that time it was safe to say that many a desert traveler—many a caravan passed out of existence.

The submarine voyagers considered themselves lucky to have escaped. It was somewhere before the air was sufficiently lowered in temperature to render it safe to go out on deck.

In the meanwhile Frank had been doing some deep thinking.

The result was that he had decided to abandon his previous plan of setting out across the desert to the eastward in the hope of meeting a caravan.

He decided to go in the opposite direction and endeavor to find the channel of the Sahara river. It ought not to be over fifty miles distant at the most.

It seemed as if they might struggle on that far with the Venture's largest portable boat, and such provisions as they could carry.

Then they would trust themselves to the current of the underground river to carry them back to the Niger. If they could manage to make their rations extend to that time they would find plenty of game to subsist upon until the African coast should be reached.

Thence down the Niger they could proceed until once more the coast was reached and passage procured on some home bound vessel.

It was hard to think of abandoning the Venture and its valuable electrical machinery and furnishings, but human life depended upon it.

And that weighed heavier in the scale. Frank's plan was at once seized with avidity by the others.

The largest portable boat on board was got out. This would carry the four explorers easily, as well as a good store of provisions.

But Frank did more. He loaded one of the smaller boats. These were packed with the provisions upon an improvised drag or sledge, and tugging at the ropes they set forth.

A tender farewell was taken of the submarine boat.

It was an impressive moment. There was a great uncertainty about the venture they were making. They might never reach the river.

But it was the only recourse left them. If they failed they could be no worse off.

It was slow and painful work, hauling the heavy load over the sands, but they persevered manfully.

At night they camped under some dune with the broad canopy of Heaven for a roof. Early in the morning they would be again astrid.

It was a week of laborious traveling and sinking hopes, before they finally came in sight of a long line of green against the horizon.

"The river!" shouted Frank.

With feverish earnestness they pressed forward. At times it seemed as if the distant break in the white sands was only a mirage. But hope buoyed them up.

And they were nearly insane with joy when they reached the banks of the stream, and were able to bathe in its waters and drink their fill.

That night they slept sweetly on the green turf. The next morning at an early hour the boats were rigged and launched.

The stores were placed aboard, and then with the smaller boat in tow they pushed out from shore.

The current took them resistlessly along, and they were en route for the Niger and for home.

But the prospect was not as yet an absolutely alluring one. There were hundreds of miles to travel yet through dark underground streams, over rough and dangerous rapids before they should even reach the Niger.

And the voyage down that mighty river bade fair to be even more dangerous.

But Frank said:

"It may be that we can devise a way to cut across from the Knee to the coast. If so, we will save that detour."

"I trust that may be possible," said Brosseau. "I am anxious to report to our syndicate in Paris. We shall endeavor to make reparation to you for the loss of your submarine boat, M. Reade."

"By no means!" said Frank. "I do not expect that. The loss is mine."

"But it was in our interest. If you had not come into the Niger country you would not have lost your boat."

"But I assumed the risk," declared Frank. "No; I ask no indemnity. I might have lost the boat in any other part of the world. You are in no way responsible."

"Yet I am sure our syndicate will feel morally guilty if they do not make reparation."

But Frank protested that he would receive nothing of the kind. There were many good and sufficient reasons for his decision.

But by this time the two boats had reached the mouth of the underground river. One plunge, and the light of day was left behind them.

There was no alternative now. They could not go back.

But as well die in the underground channel as in the sands of the Sahara. It could only be death in any case.

But Frank clung to hope. He knew that the current alone must eventually take them out of the dark depths. It was only a question of subsistence until such time.

And he could see no reason why the provisions should not hold out. There was need of one thing, and this was to keep the boats always in the current.

If they should collide with any spur of rock jutting from the walls of the passage there was always danger of capsizing. This was perilous.

Frank had brought an electric lantern and storage battery from the submarine boat. This was placed in the bow.

Either Barney or Pomp were always at the rudder. In this way accident was guarded against.

In sluggish parts of the stream the paddles were used. Thus the downward journey was made.

And still on through the cavern passages the boat ran.

Days passed into weeks.

The voyagers had been in darkness, relieved only by the one electric lantern, for so long that they had grown chalky white, and felt weak and debilitated.

Brosseau even had quite a serious ill spell, and all felt depressed by the damp atmosphere and gloom.

"It seems to me," said Frank, one day, "that we ought to be somewhere near that oasis and the lagoon where we gave Mahmoud Ali his bath."

"Indeed, that is true," agreed Brosseau. "When we get there I shall feel as if the worst of the journey is over."

"From there to the Niger we should make the run in a week. The current is very swift—"

"And once in the Niger—"

"Home!"

It was a magic word and revived the drooping spirits of all. But it had one bad effect.

It caused Barney who was at the tiller to, for a moment, forget his nerve. He lost his grip on the handle, but for an instant. A catastrophe followed.

Unknown to the voyagers a rock approached the surface just here. Had Barney kept his original course he might have run safely by it.

But he veered just enough, and the bow of the boat striking the rock swung about, the current whirled the other end against the opposite wall of the passage and—presto!

All were in an instant in the water. The boat turned upside down, and stores and all went to the bottom.

The other boat broke its hold and went flashing down the current and out of sight.

The four voyagers were in the current swimming for their lives. Only a miracle seemed likely to save them.

A worse disaster could hardly have befallen them. Both boats were going pell-mell beyond their reach. What was to save them?

Frank swam by Brosseau's side. Luckily the Frenchman was a water dog.

Barney and Pomp were adepts and could not be drowned. The Celt gave a shout:

"Shure I'm goin' down the stream afther the boats!" he cried, "If I catch thim I'll cum back!"

"We might as well all do that!" cried Frank, "let the current take you. Come on all!"

The order was obeyed.

It was easy to float in the swift current. But what was to be the end of it all?

They could not hope to float forever in that current. Strength and human resistance must give out sometime.

And then, what? All depended upon overtaking the boats. But though they drifted on for what seemed an interminable distance not a sign of them was seen.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CARAVAN—THE END.

AGAIN it seemed as if death in its most grisly awful form was about to fold its dread pinions about the voyagers.

What could they hope for swimming in that shoreless underground river? To escape? It seemed hardly likely.

Already despair had begun to fall upon the drifting men, when Barney gave a loud joyful cry.

"Begorra we're saved!" he yelled.

A glimmer of light burst upon the view of all. The swift realization came with it.

"Heaven be praised," said Frank, fervently, "it is the lagoon!"

"The lagoon!" screamed Brosseau. "We are saved!"

Desperately they swam now. Every moment the circle of light became larger.

Then they drifted out finally into the open air. The daylight was blinding but it was grateful.

The still calm waters of the lagoon with its circle of green palms was like a glimpse of Paradise. Words fail to express the sensations of the voyagers.

It did not take them long to crawl out on the sands, where they sank down exhausted. The air was close and stifling, the sun a fierce ball of fire.

But they were safe, and once more in the light of day. This was enough to know for the present.

For some while all lay in the sands recovering strength and reason. Barney was the first to recover.

The Celt saw the towboat intact with its load of provisions out in the lagoon.

"Bejabers," he exclaimed; "I'm afther thinkin' it wud be well to bring that ashore."

So he plunged in and swam out, and drew the boat ashore. This revived the spirits of all.

They had lost the larger boat, but this one with the most of the stores, including their rifles and ammunition, was spared them. This was a matter for consolation.

As they were wet to the skin and much exhausted, it was decided to remain in the oasis until recuperated. Their clothes soon dried in the sun, and after a bit of something to eat and drink, all felt refreshed.

This was the familiar spot where they had defeated Mahmoud Ali and his Bedouins and the circumstances were recalled with some interest.

"I wonder if any of the wretches are lurking about here now?" ventured Brosseau.

"That is highly improbable!" said Frank, "there would be little likelihood of their expecting to ever see us again. The Bedouins never stay long in one place!"

"Ugh!" exclaimed the Frenchman. "I dread going back into that underground river again!"

"We have the alternative!"

"What?"

"The desert."

"How far do you reckon it would be to travel from here to the coast?"

"Perhaps fifteen hundred miles!"

Brosseau shook his head.

"Ah!" he said, "it is out of the question. The best thing we can do is to drift on down to the Niger."

"Unless we could find some safe method of crossing the desert to some friendly Arab town in the interior. There is the city of Warno but a few hundred miles distant. Thence we could travel with caravans down to the slave coast."

"Let us start for Warno at once!" cried Brosseau, eagerly.

"Ah, I fear it would be hardly practicable!"

"Why not?"

"Between here and that city are many tribes of hostile Arabs. We could never get there without a powerful bodyguard."

"That disposes of that then," said Brosseau, with a sigh of disappointment. "Well, what shall we do? Start at once?"

"Let us take a look about the oasis first."

"And fall into the clutches of Bedouins again?"

"I hardly think there is any danger of that," said Frank, "but we will keep our eyes open!"

"I am agreeable!"

Taking their rifles with them Frank and Brosseau sauntered through the oasis. It was deserted beyond a doubt save by their party.

But just as they reached its eastern verge both gave an exclamation of surprise.

The sight which met their gaze was a surprising one.

Out on the glistening sands, and extending as far as the eye could reach was a train of horses, elephants, camels and men.

All glittered with fine silks and silver and gilt. The trappings of the beasts were all of the finest sort.

While alongside the train rode armed detachments of soldiers. It was like a vision.

"A caravan!" ejaculated Brosseau.

"It is that," agreed Frank.

"What a monster!"

"And a rich one!"

"I should say so; it must have come from some far end of the desert, perhaps from Cairo! They are coming to this oasis!"

"Where do you think they are bound?"

Frank and Brosseau exchanged glances. The same thoughts ran in the mind of each.

"They cannot be foes to us," declared Frank.

"By no means," said Brosseau. "We can join their train and travel on with them to some point of safety."

"It will be slow."

"True—but safe."

Back to the lagoon they went. The matter was laid before Barney and Pomp.

"I'se ready to do jes' wha' Marse Frank says am best," declared Pomp.

"Bejabers, the same here," declared Barney.

"Very well," said Frank, "we will have a talk with the leader of the caravan."

A few moments later the advance guard of the caravan entered the oasis. They were surprised to find our adventurers there, but were friendly, and Frank learned that the leader of the caravan was a rich merchant named Ali Sphir.

He rode up later on his powerful Arabian charger. He was a man of strong personality but cordial manners.

The result was that horses were readily purchased, and our voyagers became a part of the caravan.

Warno was the destination of the caravan. This suited Frank to a certainty.

There were a thousand souls in the caravan and as many heavily

laden horses, camels and elephants. It was a very imposing array.

Ali Shir became very communicative and social with the Americans. When they told him of their experiences with Mahmoud Ali, he said that he had information that the robber sheik meant to attack the caravan in a little mountain pass some fifty miles further on.

"But we are ready for him," said the Cairo merchant. "We have a body guard of janizaries sufficient to whip a dozen bands like his." The caravan rested in the oasis for two days.

This gave the animals a chance to recuperate from the long journey across the desert. Then the start was made.

One of the horses purchased by our voyagers was used as a pack horse, their stores being laden upon it. Then the long march was begun.

It was by no means devoid of interesting features. Ali Shir was kindly disposed toward our voyagers, and they were taken into his train. He traveled with quite a retinue as is the custom of the wealthy Arab.

In his train were dancing girls and athletes, all going to Warno to attend the sacred festival. When the caravan halted evenings a circle was formed and in the light of the watch fires these entertained the other members of the train with their specialties.

Then Ali Shir would spread tempting viands and break bottles of Turkish wine, and a general merry making would follow.

But as they drew near the Dhar mountains some feelings of apprehension were experienced, for it was at this point that the attack from Mahmoud Ali was expected.

It was known that Ali Shir's caravan was the richest which had crossed the desert in many years. There was no doubt but that Mahmoud would turn out his largest force.

Besides the spices and rich stuffs carried, there was a large sum in gold and silver intended for the public treasury at Warno. It was this no doubt which excited the cupidity of Mahmoud more than aught else.

He would make a stern bid for it, and savage fighting must follow.

So the fierce looking janizaries sharpened their scimeters and loaded their long Arab guns. All was made ready for trouble.

The Dhar mountains had already appeared on the horizon. That night the caravan camped just under their shadow.

But it was known that Mahmoud would not attack the train out on the level plain. It was his trick to wait until they were well into the hills.

The defile through which they must pass was narrow and deep. There was an admirable opportunity for an ambushade.

But Ali Shir was not to be easily entrapped. His first move was to send a bodyguard, as a sort of skirmish line, ahead in the early morning hours.

This passed through the defile without hindrance. Mahmoud was waiting for the train itself.

But the wily Ali Shir knew what he was about. He sent a hundred men on a detour up among the heights on foot. Then the caravan advanced.

The attack came at once. The minions of Mahmoud came swarming down to slaughter the camel tenders and plunder the train.

But they met with grief. The skirmish party came flying back upon their rear. The foot soldiers from the rocks above smote their flank.

Sharp and fierce was the fight. But hemmed in as they were, Mahmoud's men could accomplish little.

They were obliged to fall back, then they were routed and slaughtered like sheep. Mahmoud himself was killed in the melee.

"Which ends the career of the robber sheik!" cried Brosseau; "and I, for one, am not sorry."

"Nor I!" agreed Frank.

The caravan was not molested again on its way to Warno. It reached the Soudanese city in good time for the great festival.

Here our voyagers remained for a fortnight. Then they worked southward with another caravan.

This brought them back to their first love, the Niger, at a point called Gamba, and in that navigable section of the great river known as the Quarra.

Here it was easy to procure a native boat and in it they embarked. From one settlement to another they made their way, and finally reached the delta.

A native coasting vessel took them to Lagos and thence they found transportation to Freetown in the Sierra Leone.

As it happened a British steamer was taking in water here, and they shipped aboard her for Liverpool, England.

Here they separated, Frank, with Barney and Pomp taking an American steamer, while Monsieur Brosseau returned to Paris. The parting was quite an affecting one, Brosseau declaring:

"I shall never forget you, my dear friends, or our arduous experiences below the Sahara. Farewell, and God bless you!"

In due time Frank, with Barney and Pomp reached America. They went at once to Readstown.

They were glad enough to see home once more, and Barney declared:

"Be me sowl, aside from the ould sod there's no place loike Ameriky. I'd niver want to live in any other part av the world."

Frank received a fine testimonial from the Sahara Improvement Company signed by all its officers as well as a letter of thanks from the President of the French Republic.

With these honors and his experiences in the underground district of the Sahara he was inclined to be content.

But he at once began work on a new invention. What it was we may learn at a future day. With which statement let us write

[THE END.]

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